



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

### HOME PRAYER PACK FOR MAY 2023

As we continue to worship from home, please find enclosed materials to assist.

If you are unsure where to start, perhaps the following is a useful guide (with thanks to *A Sermon For Every Sunday*):

- If you are with your spouse, partner, and/or family, gather around a table. If you are on your own, find a place that is quiet and comfortable.
- Light a candle to symbolise the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that you are entering sacred time.
- Start with a simple opening prayer, acknowledging that Jesus promised to come to wherever people gathered in His name.
- Read through the weekly readings, as outlined in our newsletter. If in a group, take turns on reading out loud to the group.
- Follow up with a discussion based on the readings.
- Enter into a time of prayer. This can be as simple as “What am I thankful for?” and “What am I concerned about?”

If you need a bible at home, please call the church on 4832 1026, and one can be provided. If you are interested, *Songs of Praise* airs on ABC TV at 2:30pm each Sunday, and can also be watched any time at <https://iview.abc.net.au/collection/2016>

Stay safe. God bless.

**May 7, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

One of the biggest questions we must face as followers of Christ is that of how our faith interacts with the crises in our world, and our engagement with them. It can be tough to walk the line between faith as an escape that makes us feel safe by "protecting" us from the world's problems, and faith as little more than a framework for directing our own efforts to fix things. The third way – that of participating in God's saving work while simultaneously trusting God for the outcome in our lives and world – is not always easy to live. But it is the challenge we are given this week through the Scriptures.

May we find both assurance and a call to action in our worship this week.

**READINGS:**

Acts 7:55-60: Stephen who has been on trial, expresses his vision of Jesus glorified, which angers the religious leaders, who drag him out of the city to stone him. But, Stephen, as he dies, prays for his attackers, and commits himself to God.

Psalms 31:1-5, 15-16: The Psalmist (David, according to the heading) pleads for God's protection and deliverance from enemies who seek to harm and ensnare him, and commits his soul into God's care.

1 Peter 2:2-10: Christ, who was rejected by people, but honoured by God, is the cornerstone on which God is building a spiritual temple in which followers of Christ are the stones. This community that built on Christ is called out of darkness into God's light to be God's holy nation.

John 14:1-14: Jesus encourages his disciples to trust in him and not be troubled, for he is the way to God and God is revealed and known in him.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

If following Christ is seen as a way to avoid suffering and struggle, we will deeply be disappointed by the message of this week's Lectionary readings. Beneath all of them lies the reality that Jesus, and those who followed Jesus, faced persecution, accusation and suffering. They were not exempt from life's troubles, and sometimes their faith even brought suffering on them. And so we witness Stephen who is stoned for his witness to Christ, but who entrusts himself to God. We read the words of the Psalmist who, facing persecution and attack, commits himself to God's care and protection. Peter tells of how Christ was rejected, but God honoured him and has built a community of light with Christ as the foundation. And Jesus, reassuring his disciples, reminds them that they can find peace in trusting him, and connecting with God through him. The gift of this week is the assurance that, even as we face suffering, our lives are in God's hands, and, if we will entrust ourselves to God's care, we will find peace and will be partners in God's work in our world. This is not the message of ease and of guarantees of the "good life" that we might hope for. But, it is something much better. It is an assurance that as we live in this world and experience its

pain, along with all people, we are partners with God, and we have the confidence that our lives and their ultimate destiny are in God's hands.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** As we face the great challenges of our world, we can be tempted to one of two responses. On the one hand we can grow fearful and alarmist, desperately pointing out the crises, feeling that it is all up to us, that our future is in our hands and courting the hopelessness that this can bring. On the other hand we can use faith as an escape, a way to focus on "heaven" and ignore the problems of earth, and a doorway to a naive and passive attitude that requires no engagement from us and no work on our part to change the brokenness of our world. The Scriptures call us to a different response from either of these, though. While trusting in God's care, while recognising that our future is not in our own hands, but God's, and while finding peace in the assurance of God's care and love, we are encouraged to work with God, asking boldly and courageously for God's grace to impact our world, seeking to do the "greater works" that Christ called us to, and living as God's people of light, welcoming all into God's compassion and mercy. The assurance that faith brings gives us hope for the world and its future. The work that faith calls us to makes us participants in God's saving work in our world. These two go together, and call us, daily, to make local changes that have global impact. To consider what we buy and eat, what we wear and drive, how we vote and participate in community and social processes. Perhaps the place to start is to examine our hearts, find the places within us where we are most concerned or afraid, and ask how to lead us into faith and trust around that issue, while showing what practical steps we can take to be part of the solution to that specific global grief.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** In local communities it is common for those who have the means to separate themselves from the problems of the rest of the world. We do this by creating gated communities for the wealthy, to protect them from the poor and from crime. We do this by hiding in a belief that our small efforts can make little difference. We do this by allowing our pessimism to lead us to self-interest and "us and them" thinking. But, in the Church we have no such luxury. Christ has shown us that it is in living and working for God's reign that we find the assurance and peace that we seek, and this means not separating ourselves from the world, but engaging the world in Christ's name. Rather than adopt a cynical "the world's going to hell anyway" view of things, or buying into a "Left Behind" kind of pessimism about the world, we can embrace God's saving and hopeful perspective on things and we can seek to be part of God's healing. We can trust that God is at work in the world and in our communities, and we can look for the signs. And then we can actively participate in what we see God doing in our schools, in our neighbourhoods, in our local governments, in our churches and in our homes. We can seek to live as the community of light that, in whatever small way we can, shines light into the community around us. This will almost certainly mean enduring misunderstanding and even persecution by those who are invested in the "way things are". It will mean embracing the pain of self-giving as we work on behalf of those who need to experience God's grace and compassion. And it will mean, even in the face of disillusionment and discouragement, holding fast to the assurance that Jesus offers. But, as we live as people of trust and hope, we bring hope to the world.

**May 14, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

This week flows beautifully – and challengingly – from last week. The assurance that was explored through the readings in Easter 5A is found this week in the promise of God's presence. In the light of the huge struggles we face in the world today, it can be tough to speak about God's presence, especially when we seek to affirm God's presence with those who suffer. But, the readings all call us to embrace the reality that God is with us even in the dark times, and that it is in God that we all "live, move and have our being" – whoever we may be.

May our worship this week remind us of God's constant presence, and open our eyes to recognise God even in the most unexpected places.

### **READINGS:**

**Acts 17:22-31:** Paul preaches to the people of Athens, remarking on their many shrines, and using the shrine to the unknown god as a springboard, tells them about the God who is near to every person, and who has revealed God's self to humanity in Jesus.

**Psalms 66:8-20:** A psalm of praise to God for testing God's people, rescuing them and forgiving them.

**1 Peter 3:13-22:** Peter encourages the believers to endure suffering for doing good as Christ did, and to remember that they are saved in Christ, who is now in a place of honour and authority with God.

**John 14:15-21:** Jesus invites his disciples to show their love for him by obeying him, and he promises that the Holy Spirit will come to them and be in them, leading them into all truth.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

Following from last week's word of assurance, the Lectionary continues in an attitude of comfort, emphasising God's nearness and God's strengthening of those who struggle. In Athens Paul speaks to the people of the city about a God who can be known and "in whom we live, move and have our being." He invites them to recognise that God is very near to all people whether they are aware of God or not. The Psalmist reflects on God's presence even during times of 'testing' and gives thanks for God's rescue and forgiveness, and celebrates that God does indeed hear the prayers of God's people. In Peter's letter the apostle continues to offer comfort to a persecuted church assuring them that they are following in Christ's nail-scarred footsteps, and that in Christ they are saved. And, in John's Gospel, Jesus offers the promise of the Spirit, assuring his disciples that by the Spirit they will always know that God is with them and in them, and they will enjoy the love relationship that Jesus has given them. The wonderful, challenging and comforting message of this week is that God is intimately available to us, and that God's presence and resources are accessible to us as we face the challenges and struggles of following Christ and living fully. The inevitable question this raises is whether we are willing to embrace God's presence, and rest in God's strength even as we wrestle with injustice and the big crises facing our world.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** One of the big questions of faith is this: what does it mean that God is present in situations of crisis and suffering? What might it mean for us to affirm God's presence among those who live through natural disasters? What might it mean to affirm God's presence among people in countries where revolution or violence is breaking out? What does it mean to affirm God's presence among the poor, those infected and affected by AIDS, those dying of cancer? One thing we must take from the story of the cross and resurrection is that God does not use suffering to punish, and that God always comes alongside those who suffer. Even more, if we are to proclaim the power of the resurrection in this Easter season, it must mean affirming that God's Spirit – God's strength and comfort and resources – can be known and experienced by those who are suffering. And for those of us who are going through times of security and peace, there is a calling, a responsibility to be agents of God's comfort, God's compassion and God's strength to those who are most vulnerable. Often the best way God's presence is experienced by others is through people of faith who seek to embody the grace and compassion of Christ in all of their interactions and relationships. On a global scale, this means refusing to turn a blind eye to places of suffering in the world. It means seeking, through our voice, our vote and our generosity, to offer some comfort and assistance to those in need. It means remembering our suffering brothers and sisters in prayer. And it means working daily to help to build a world in which God's presence is more easily recognised by all, and in which no one suffers without a companion to offer care, protection, provision and healing.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** In every life and every community the question of God's presence is raised at some point. For many it is related to an academic question related to the existence of evil in the world. But for most, the question ultimately boils down to personal struggle, personal pain and the need within each of us to connect with something bigger than ourselves. Unfortunately, the Church has too often made God's presence appear contained – available only to a select, chosen few – and we have implied that God cannot be found except within the walls of our buildings. We have sometimes even fallen into the Old Testament view that those who suffer do so because of God's judgement, and those who have much are "blessed" by God's presence and provision. The result of this is that we have made God into a fickle, partisan deity who favours some over others (mostly the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised), and who cannot be turned to for refuge in our darkest times. What a pity this is – and what a travesty of the Gospel. The readings this week make it clear that God's presence is ubiquitous, and that God's draws close to those who need refuge and protection and comfort. Imagine what it would be like if the Church was the first place people turned to in times of grief and trauma. Imagine how different it would be if our message was one of grace and welcome – affirming that all people "live and move and have their being" in God's presence, and need only to recognise this – rather than judging and exclusive. Imagine how different the impact of Christianity might be on this world if, instead of claiming that God's gift of the Spirit was some kind of spiritual "merit badge" for a chosen few, we, like Jesus, invited all people to receive God's gift and know God's presence, comfort and strength for themselves! At the very least, we need to stop arrogantly believing that we can be gatekeepers for God's presence, and humbly, like Jesus, recognise that God is at work and present in the most unexpected and surprising places.

**May 21, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life, "Sacredise"*

### **READINGS:**

**Acts 1:6-14:** The disciples question Jesus about the timing of God's restoration of Israel, but Jesus promises the Holy Spirit and then ascends into heaven as they watch. Then two white-robed men tell them that Jesus will return in the same way they saw him leave.

**Psalms 68:1-10, 32-35:** A psalm of victory and praise, celebrating God's might in military terms, and rejoicing in God's protection of the weak and vulnerable, and in God's provision of a home for God's people.

**1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11:** Peter encourages the persecuted believers, reminding them that they have witnessed Christ's suffering and share in it, and that they have the hope of seeing Christ's glory, and sharing in that as well.

**John 17:1-11:** Jesus prays for himself that God will take him back into the glory he shared with the Father. Then he prays for his disciples, who have received Christ's message and have believed and given him glory, that they may be protected by God's name and may be one as Christ and the Father are one.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

It may sound like a strange connection to make, but this week's readings bring together two ideas that appear disparate – glory and refugees. Jesus was, in a sense, the ultimate refugee – choosing to leave behind his home in glory in order to live without a home (See [Matthew 8:20](#)) and to proclaim God's Kingdom as a home for all. In the light of this, his prayer to return to glory reveals a poignant longing for home. In a similar way, in Acts, Jesus, in a cryptic, round about way, invites his disciples to give up on their hope for an earthly kingdom as home, and to recognise that God is their home. The angelic message that they will see Jesus return in the same way he left is reminiscent of Jesus' words in [John 14:2-3](#). For the Psalmist, God's victory brings a place of safety and belonging to the most vulnerable and to God's people. Peter encourages the believers to endure persecution because, as they share in Christ's suffering, so they also have the hope of sharing in Christ's glory – Christ's home. So, even as Jesus the Refugee longed for home, and opened the way for his followers to find a home in God's Kingdom (God's glory) so we live as refugees, at home in God's glory, but, walking in this world, unable as yet to see and experience it completely. And as Christ the Refugee sought to provide a home for refugees – the marginalised, the poor, the excluded and the suffering – so, as we are called to follow him, we are called to be one with Christ and the Father, not just in their glory, but also in their home-building mission.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** The plight of refugees is never long forgotten in our world. Almost daily we are faced with images of those who have lost homes through war and conflict, through natural disasters, through political exile or through the impact of poverty. Millions of people find themselves as refugees, and the majority of them (75% I believe) are women.

The impact of homelessness on the dignity and humanity of those who live it is immeasurable, and is a massive challenge to those of us who seek to follow Christ. But, there is much that we can do. We can support calls for international assistance in places of conflict that cause the displacement of people. We can lobby for the cancellation of unjust debts that cripple third world countries and leave many of their people destitute. We can vote for and work for more equitable international trade regulations that enable poorer countries to compete on a level playing field, and that can help to boost their economies. We can help, through our influence, our voice and our participation in political processes, to ensure that aid that is promised to poor countries is delivered. We can speak out against the corruption in international business deals that would line the pockets of a few and stop benefits reaching those who most need them. Perhaps we can even travel to refugee camps (or local homeless shelters) and offer comfort, food and compassion to those who feel rejected and forgotten by the world. Whatever we may choose to do, we cannot follow the Refugee Christ and turn a blind eye to those who are displaced. And then, along with whatever social and material help we may offer, we can continue to invite people into the home that is God's glory, God's reign, where all people are equally welcome at the table, and all belong equally.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** If the church is called to be anything it is called to be a home to the homeless and displaced. This does not just mean those who lack a physical home, but those who find themselves alone without a family, without friends, without a spiritual or emotional home. Unfortunately, though, it is too often the Church that leaves people as refugees, turning them away from the community of faith for no reason other than that they are different – in gender, sexuality, colour, culture, language, theology or appearance. Every community has people who long for a place to find a home in God's grace and God's Kingdom. These refugees are deeply loved and unconditionally welcomed by Christ, and we are called to manifest this as we open our doors and our hearts to them. More than this, we are called to seek out those who long to know the promise of God's Spirit. This calling has a huge impact on how we identify ourselves as Church, on how we understand our mission, and on how we worship. As William Temple said, "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those that are not its members." The challenge for us is to recognise that we are a refugee community – one that does not find its home in the kingdoms of this world, or by controlling political power structures (as the disciples had to learn), but one that waits for, that longs for, a return to glory, to a home that is eternal and that is both manifest now and yet to be realised fully in the future. Once we have truly grasped this, we find we cannot help but stand alongside and seek to serve those who find themselves to be refugees of every kind. What might it mean for your church to view itself as a refugee community?

**May 28, 2023**

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

Sometimes it feels like the celebration of Pentecost has become an exercise in missing the point. What was a radical, communal, inclusive and world-shifting event has become, in much contemporary practice, and individualist, exclusive, status-quo sustaining experience with little more to commend it than a sense of euphoria. If only we could recapture some of the Church-birthing impact of this significant day, both the Church and the world around it would, like the Pentecost spectators, be amazed by what God is doing among us.

May the Spirit of Pentecost disturb, challenge and empower us as we worship.

**READINGS:**

**Acts 2:1-21:** The believers are filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and they start to praise God in various languages.

**OR Numbers 11:24-30:** Moses appoints 70 leaders and God fills them with "some of the spirit that was on Moses". As this happens they prophesy including two in the camp. When Joshua hears about this he asks Moses to stop it, but Moses expresses his wish that all of God's people would be filled with God's Spirit and would prophesy.

**Psalms 104:24-34, 35b:** The world and all its creatures depend on God for provision and breath – which leads the Psalmist to commit to praise God.

**1 Corinthians 12:3b-13:** No one can acknowledge Jesus' lordship without God's Spirit, and God's Spirit, given to all of God's people, gives different gifts to each person for the good of all.

**OR Acts 2:1-21** (As Above)

**John 20:19-23:** Jesus appears to the disciples in the Upper Room and commissions them, breathing on them and giving them his Spirit, and instructing them that they are sent as he was sent.

**Or John 7:37-39:** Jesus invites the people to come to him and receive living water – God's Spirit that would well up inside of them – from him.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

The Day of Pentecost is a celebration that is rich and challenging for followers of Christ, but it is easy to miss the transformative call that it offers. The readings for this year bring together a number of different themes, that all combine to beckon us into a deeper encounter with God and God's reign and into a life of Christ-like service. In Acts God's Spirit is given as the empowerment for God's people (sons and daughters) to become prophetic proclaimers of God's goodness – as Peter indicates through the connection with the Joel prophecy. The Pentecost narrative also contains echoes of the experience of Moses and the leaders he appoints to serve God's people, and Moses' longing that all of God's people should be filled with God's Spirit and proclaim God's message. The Psalmist recognises that



it is God's breath that sustains all creation and that the only appropriate response is to offer his life in praise of God. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul teaches that God's Spirit is given to all and empowers all so that all of God's people may serve one another. In John's Gospel this calling is opened even further as Jesus, in his gift of the Spirit to the disciples, informs them that they are now sent as he was sent – and he was sent to bring living water to all who would come to him. Here, then, is the call of this Day – to open ourselves to God's Spirit, to be empowered and gifted, in order that we may be sent to bring God's life, God's grace and forgiveness and God's empowering Spirit to all others. Pentecost, then, is not a moment of personal bliss, or simply an experience that can be enjoyed in some sort of euphoria. Rather, it is a moment which changes everything, in which our lives are equipped and marked for God's reign, and in which our quest to follow Christ is made possible through the gift of the Spirit. The evidence of a Pentecost Church, then, is not so much particular gifts or experiences, but the life, grace and service that the Church brings to the world. We are filled with the Spirit not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world that God loves so dearly.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** It is deeply disturbing that people who call themselves by Christ's name across the world have all too often embraced the divisions of the world, and have been known for their retreat from the world, their escapism from the world and its struggles, and their failure to serve sacrificially as Christ did. It is hard to understand what we mean by being "filled with God's Spirit" when this remains the case. Rather, in every place where people are divided, Christ-followers, who are filled with the Spirit, are called to be at work bringing peace and reconciliation. In every place where there is grief, pain, hatred and conflict, God's people are called to bring forgiveness, comfort, healing and compassion. In every place where people are weak and vulnerable God's people are called to strengthen and empower. The gift of Pentecost is the inspiration and empowerment we need to become those who, like Christ, seek to empower others. It is the strength to stand against injustice, oppression and exploitation, and it is the strength to embrace the sacrifices we must make in order to serve the weakest and most vulnerable among us. The Pentecost Spirit drives us back into the world to engage it and serve it. As we are filled with the Spirit we may find ourselves called to work with government agencies, or to challenge them. We may be called to help big business serve and give to impoverished communities, or we may be called to oppose unfair business practices. We may be called to work with individuals and communities at "grass roots" levels, or we may be called to work for systemic change. But, in every call, we will find ourselves being empowered by God's Spirit, we will find ourselves working to bring diverse people together and to reconcile and unify those who are separated, and we will find our selves drawn into communities of care, engagement and compassion. Thanks to the internet, this work can be more connected and more globally influential than ever. All it needs now is people who, by God's Spirit, have the divine will to make it happen.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** Pentecost has, all too often, been seen simply as a personal experience that moves the recipient into some sort of spiritual elite. The marks of Pentecost have all too often been seen as personal, supernatural experiences and the benefits of Pentecost have been understood as personal edification, personal euphoria and personal strengthening. Sometimes, the Pentecost experience has even been used as the basis for

separation and division of one group from another, and as the justification for withdrawal from the world into a kind of spiritual wagon-circling. But, in every community, every neighbourhood and every church God's Spirit seeks to enable people to "speak one another's languages", to welcome and serve one another, and to work together to serve and empower those who most need help and compassion. This is the opposite of what we have often understood as being "filled with the Spirit". When God's Spirit fills us we find ourselves being "sent" to serve others. We find ourselves seeking to bring peace and reconciliation between people – whether it's a married couple in conflict, parents and children who cannot find each other, or church groups that are unable to break free of competitiveness and suspicion. We find ourselves seeking to understand those who are different from us, and we find ourselves reaching out in compassion and service to those who are marginalised, excluded, poor, diseased and rejected. Rather than "lifting us up" above others into a group that is somehow favoured by God, Pentecost "pulls us down" to connect with those that we would never naturally have the strength or inclination to relate to. Rather than leading us out of the world, Pentecost drives us back into it to proclaim and live the prophetic message of God's reign, as Christ did. In what ways is your church community tempted to separate itself from the world around it? In what ways do you sense the Spirit driving you out to proclaim God's grace and glory to those who are different from you? In what ways are you being equipped and called by the Spirit to bring people together and to serve those who need to experience God's presence and activity through human hands?